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ABSTRACT

The rationale for conducting a community survey to obtain information on a specific problem or issue for local school board policy formation is illustrated in this case study. A survey mailed to 10 percent of all district households in a small midwestern city yielded a 31 percent response rate. Survey analysis was utilized by the school board to develop a policy planning approach and to make recommendations. Findings indicate that the crucial first step in the board's policy-making role involves identification of the problem. In this case, the school board decided to develop multi-approach communication vehicles to solve the "knowledge gap" problem in their community. A conclusion is that the community survey is useful as a feedback mechanism to monitor diverse community attitudes and to improve the policy planning process; however, it is useful only if undertaken for a specific purpose and if utilized for planning and action by the school district leadership. Two tables and figures, survey responses, resulting policy decisions, and the survey instrument are included. (7 references) (LMI)

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The Community Survey: A Basis for Policy Analysis and Planning

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"Let's survey the community to see what the public thinks." Suggestions along these lines are occasionally made by school board members and administrators. It certainly sounds like the democratic thing to do, gathering the wishes, preferences, and opinions of those served by the district, especially in a political climate that increasingly questions public school effectiveness. But proposals to survey the community are often made with only the vaguest idea of the type of information needed or its use.

The premise of this paper is that the solicitation of input from constituents should be undertaken for a specific purpose(s). Is there a particular problem confronting the district? Is there a set of policy options under consideration from which the public can make a reasoned choice? Does the citizenry have knowledge and/or opinions on an issue that can not be obtained in some another way? When a school board can answer "yes" to any of these or similar questions, then a community survey is an appropriate undertaking.

One specific rationale for conducting a community survey is to obtain information on specific problems or issues of importance to the public in order to develop responsive strategies or policies. To illustrate this proposition the results of a case study undertaken in a small Midwestern city are presented. The intent is to demonstrate that the community survey can provide valuable information to support policy planning, and that conducting such a survey is of little use unless it leads to planning and action by school district leadership.

The Case

The superintendent and school board felt considerable anxiety and frustration after a series of mill levy referenda had been defeated over a three-year period. Their consternation was due in large part to the apparent discrepancy between what they perceived as a period of measurable gain for the district's educational program (i.e., significant gains on standardized test performance) yet received limited acknowledged public support for its program improvement efforts.

Deliberations among district administrators, who concurrently had discussions with the teaching staff, identified a number of issues that might relate to the perceived lack of community support for the schools. The issue areas identified in these preliminary discussions included fiscal policies, physical plant adequacy, academic program adequacy, social role of the schools, and school governance (including doubts about school board/administrative leadership). These sessions led to a decision by the board of education to conduct a community survey to assess citizens' attitudes about these issues.

With the concurrence of the board, district administration decided that external assistance was needed to conduct a field study and analyze the resultant data. It was strongly felt that only persons with expertise from outside the school district would be perceived by the public as creditable. Requests for proposals were tendered and a contract was awarded to the authors. The board was aware of the importance of conducting a "valid" survey since these results were to form the basis of future policy planning. Moreover, board members wanted to be "confident" of total objectivity in analyzing the survey results for issues identification.

After a series of meetings with the district administrators, a draft of a survey instrument was presented to the school board. Board members provided additional suggestions from which a final version was completed. The survey instrument was mailed to a 10% random sample of all households in the district with follow-up mailing two weeks after the original mailing. Thirty-one percent of the sample returned usable questionnaires.

To check whether the attitudes and judgments of non-respondents were not "significantly different" from respondents, the thirty-two (32) late returns were compared to the 304 returns received within ten days of the second mailing. For purposes of this particular analysis, residents who responded only after a number of prompts were considered more like non-respondents than those who willingly responded to the survey. This check (*recognizing that the reluctant/late respondent is a small group*) showed no meaningful differences in responses to survey items between the two groups. The only noteworthy difference was that late respondents were somewhat more likely to check the "no opinion" response category on a number of the survey items. Thus,

information provided by the population sample was considered to generally reflect the opinions and attitudes of the entire community.

The results of a survey, when a sample of the entire population is used to reflect their opinion, are always subject to error simply because a sample rather than every household is used. Within certain parameters, the larger the sample is, the smaller will be the error of results. Various statistical formulae and interpretive tables can be used to estimate the size of this error. For the survey conducted in this district, a table developed by Gallup & Elam for the *Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Public Education* was used to estimate the percentage of error. Given that 336 responses formed the sample, the sample error for this survey was approximately six (6) percent. That is , if 60 % of the people responded "yes" to an item, with the remainder responding "no," then the actual or true percentage of the entire population responding "yes" would be between 54% and 66% in 95 out of 100 cases.

One particular concern of the board of education was insuring an adequate representation of the views of residents from the geographic quadrants that comprised the district, especially from those areas where many lower-income families lived. Thus, larger percentages of residents from the Southern quadrants of the district (58%) were selected for inclusion in the sample. The returns indicated a relative balance of representation from all quadrants, with 47 % from the Southern half of the city. Thus, the final results adequately reflected all geographic segments of the district, with those from the Southwest quadrant being just slightly under-represented. Racial/ethnic minorities comprised a very small proportion of the sample.

In general, the community was of the opinion the schools were doing a slightly above average job of educating its students. The overall rating given the district was a C+ (using a response set of "A" to "F" similar to that used by the Gallup & Elam Poll), whereas respondents rated all U.S. schools in the "C" range. The public indicated continued support for the priority goals established by the district five years previously and believed the board to be an effective advocate for the welfare of students. Only a small percentage of respondents saw the recent history of scholastic performance (scores on standardized tests) as being poor. On the other hand, few

rated student academic performance as excellent. Thus, there was an indication of perceived room for improvement in the basic academic program. The majority responded that more attention should be given to the basic skills and that a state recommendation to increase academic requirements for high school graduation would improve program quality.

The respondents give good but not excellent marks when rating the quality of the teaching and administrative staff. Few rated overall professional staff performance poor or failing. Respondents with higher formal education and higher income levels tended to rate the staff adequacy a little higher than did others. However, the majority of those expressing an opinion did indicate a willingness to pay more taxes to raise teachers' salaries. Additionally, a large percentage of those respondents believed salary increases should be based on "teaching performance" criteria. On the other hand, there was not strong support for increasing salaries for administrators.

On other financial issues, the public was somewhat reluctant to spend more money. The majority favored keeping spending at the same level for "at risk" students, and were ambivalent about increasing taxes for building maintenance and new equipment purchases (21% yes, 29% maybe, 35% no). If additional revenues were needed for school operations, the public's opinion was that it should come from state aid or, if not from that source, be generated by equivalent increases in state aid and ad valorem real and property taxes.

The respondents identified a number of problems the district needed to address. The use of alcohol and drugs and the lack of discipline in the schools were perceived as serious problems, a majority of the respondents were concerned about the lack of parent and student interest in school. Based upon the responses to specific questions on the survey, a large segment of the community believed the board and school administration were not as effective as they could be in attracting community/parent involvement in school affairs. That opinion was held most strongly by those who had children attending public schools. Respondents, however, did not express a desire to alter the method of electing school board members -- that is, moving from the current system of at-large board election to election by sub-districts.

Finally, sources of information on the schools most frequently identified by respondents

were not official district sources. The primary source of information (79%) was the local newspaper. The next most frequently mentioned sources were word-of-mouth reports from parents, other adults and comments from students. Only one-third of the respondents indicated they received information directly from school district staff or board members.

Survey Follow-up

The board of education asked the authors to develop a summary report and to meet and confer with them to insure no errors in initial data interpretation. Survey items were accordingly grouped into six broad issue areas so that preliminary conclusions could be drawn from the survey results.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The meeting with the board had two important outcomes. First, board members had any technical questions about interpreting the results answered. Each board member was now more confident that they understood what the public's opinions were on each of the six issue areas surveyed. Second, the board recognized the need for a proactive response to the public's perception of school problems. Although the original intent was to develop action programs that responded to identified problem areas, the board never discussed this need in operational terms. Therefore, the actual policy formulation process evolved out of the data-analysis phase. The board and superintendent elected to use a policy planning approach suggested by the authors . A four-question implications form was provided to each board member to complete independently . They were requested to complete as many forms as they needed to identify all problems/policy issues.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Once this analysis stage was completed, recommendations for policy decisions were discussed over a six-month period of meetings and work sessions. The major policy conclusions reached were:

1. Community perceptions about student discipline problems were inaccurate, thus a strategy for regularly informing the public about school programs and student activities should be initiated.
2. Greater input from parents in curricular planning was needed and structures should be created to insure their involvement.
3. An allocation of $25,000.00 was authorized to initiate a middle school football program which some parents wanted.
4. A referendum seeking additional funding for building maintenance projects and teacher salary increases was proposed.
5. The school community survey would be repeated on a regular basis to ensure the receipt of accurate perceptions of public attitudes.

Implications of the Case

In its policy-making role, the board must accurately define or diagnose the problem issue(s) as a first step. For action to be constructive, a clear delineation of the problem(s) and its cause(s) is essential (Orlowski, 1984). In this case, the board of education used a community survey as a problem detection source -- that is, to isolate sources of dissatisfaction. This is an appropriate strategy since "... fluctuations in the environment trigger the perception of crisis; perception of crisis is the catalyst for policy making" (Dey & Grey, 1980). The survey results did identify a number of problem issues or confirmed those previously perceived as problems by the board and district administrators .

Causal relationships are much harder to determine and the survey results only hinted at what might be the underlying causes of detected problems. However, further analysis by the board and district administration led them to establish workable conclusions as to probable causes of

important problems. It is axiomatic that in any decision situation, including policy planning, that not all possible information can be obtained prior to arriving at a decision and something less than optimum rationality must be accepted (March & Simon, 1958). Therefore, policy makers in the *real world* arena typically attend to information sources they intuitively feel have the greatest salience (Cooksay & Freebody, 1986). Certainly this was true in the case described here.

There is both a *rational* component and a *values*, or political, component inherent in any policy-planning process. The information from the survey, although accepted as essentially correct, was interpreted through strongly held individual and collective beliefs about reality by the administrators and board members involved. For example, only 30% of the respondents to the survey indicated that extra-curricular programs at the middle schools should be expanded to cover the same range of activities the high school had. Only 43 respondents indicated competitive sports should be instituted. Yet the board decided that there would be a football program at the middle school level. The primary rationale for doing so was it would placate a vocal group of parents who were traditional supporters of the district. Given that this traditional support group (parents of enrolled students) was growing smaller (less than 25% of the district population), the policy decision aimed at maintaining this support base was considered a reasonable one. However, that decision could also exacerbate the perceived political conflict between those community members with a stake in the schools (parents) and a large number of entrenched older taxpayers who resented additional expenditures from which they did not benefit (Boyd, 1976). Self-interest has always loomed large in American voting patterns and an increasing number of citizens with no children attending public schools use the referendum channel to express their alienation (Hamilton & Cohen, 1974).

A particular area of concern in analyzing problem issues identified through the community survey was the public's perception of major problems of student behavior, particularly drug and alcohol abuse. District administration responding to inquiries made by board members at the post-survey policy-planning sessions reported very few documented cases of drug- or alcohol-related discipline problems during the previous two years. This large discrepancy between the

respondents' perceptions and the factual records of the schools was attributed to the public's lack of knowledge about the actual situation in the schools. Therefore, the policy decision to develop new, multi-approach communication vehicles to inform the public was directly aimed at solving the "knowledge gap" problem. Passive, one-way and highly cognitive communication vehicles primarily directed to parents are now viewed as inadequate information vehicles. The survey data suggested the district needed strategies that provided more opportunities for two-way communication. High levels of confidence in the schools were not likely to emerge in the absence of interactive, proactive strategies that could reach a broader spectrum of the community.

This school district's problems had more to do with *affect*, that is, creating the feeling that the schools are doing the right thing for students and are genuinely concerned about addressing the issues the public believes are important. Board of education actions needed to be more aggressive in securing citizen interest and promoting a positive image of public education. It can be inferred the "effective marketing " of local public education requires strategies that enable the board and professional staff to reach an increasingly segmented audience. Such strategies do not evolve without the use of sensing and feedback mechanisms that can regularly monitor diverse community attitudes and opinions. The regular use of the community survey is one viable technique school districts can use to obtain this feedback and enhance the policy planning process.

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Table 1
Clusters of Questions Related to Similar Topic

Cluster Topic	Question Numbers
1. Perceived adequacy of instructional program	1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 13, & 14
2. General perceptions of school district adequacy	4, 9, 10, 17, 20, & 23
3. Adequacy of teacher and administrator salaries	18, 19, 21 & 22
4. Adequacy of financial support for the school district	11, 12, 15, & 16
5. Adequacy of board of education leadership	24, 25, 27, & 28
6. Sources of information about the school district	26

Figure 1

INDIVIDUAL ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

Area: _____

WHAT THE SURVEY RESULTS SUGGEST	POLICY IMPLICATIONS	ACTION REQUIRED
Is there a problem? If so, what is it?		
How long have we had the problem?		
Where is the problem?		
With whom do we have the problem?		

Recommendations

ISSUE TOPICS FOR SURVEY

Financial Concerns / Taxes

Physical Plant Adequacy

Academic Program Quality

Extra Curricular Programs

Governance - Including Board and Administrative Leadership

Social / Community Responsibility of the Schools

School - Community Communications

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the survey was to ascertain attitudes held by the populace of Hutchinson, Kansas toward selected educational issues. More specifically, the Board of Education of USD #308 (Reno) was concerned with the acquisition of data that would provide the following information:

1. Ascertain the extent to which the residents of Hutchinson agree with the priorities for education established by the Board of Education.

2. Develop a profile of community resident attitudes toward education on a broad array of issues. Specific educational issues to be examined in the survey would be clarified through discussion with appropriate central office administrators and the Board itself.

Hutchinson Community Survey

Instructions: **Please answer each of the following questions. Place a check mark ( ) in front of the response category for each question that *best expresses* your opinion or feelings about that question.**

1. In 1984, the Board of Education adopted learning goals for students that currently guide the district's educational program. The primary goal is to teach academic skills in Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Critical Thinking, Social Science and Foreign Language. Do you agree or disagree that this goal should still be the focus of the district's educational program?

_____ Strongly agree _____ Agree _____ Not sure _____ Disagree _____ Strongly disagree

2. At the elementary and middle school levels the combined achievement test scores for all students in the basic skill areas of reading and mathematics have been above the 87th percentile (37% above the national average) for the past three years. Do you believe these results demonstrate that students at these levels are learning the basic skills?

_____ Strongly demonstrates _____ Adequately Demonstrates _____ Poorly Demonstrates _____ No opinion

3. For the past 5 years, the American College Test (ACT) scores, taken by Hutchinson students planning to go to college, have been above both the national average and the Kansas average. Do you believe these results demonstrate that our high school students are prepared to enter college and succeed?

_____ Strongly demonstrates _____ Adequately demonstrates _____ Poorly demonstrates _____ No opinion

4. What do you think are the problems with which the public schools in Hutchinson must deal?

	Not a problem	A minor problem	A major problem
Use of Drugs	_____	_____	_____
Lack of Discipline	_____	_____	_____
Lack of proper financial support	_____	_____	_____
Difficulty getting good teachers	_____	_____	_____
Difficulty getting good school administrators	_____	_____	_____
Poor or inadequate curriculum	_____	_____	_____
Poor or inadequate academic standards	_____	_____	_____
Parents' lack of interest	_____	_____	_____
Pupils' lack of interest in school	_____	_____	_____
Use of Alcohol	_____	_____	_____
Crime/vandalism	_____	_____	_____
Parent/Citizen Communication with teachers and administrators	_____	_____	_____
Lack of after-school programs	_____	_____	_____

5. The Kansas Board of Regents, among other groups, has recommended that high school students take more courses in subjects, such as math, science or foreign language, thus reducing the number of elective courses students can take. Do you think this requirement would improve or hurt the quality of education high school students receive in this community?

_____ Improve quality _____ Hurt quality _____ No opinion

6. Is it your impression that elementary schools in Hutchinson give enough attention, or not enough attention, to reading, writing, and arithmetic?

_____ Enough _____ Not enough _____ Too much _____ No opinion

7. It has been proposed that the public schools include courses on "*character education*" to help students develop personal values and ethical behavior. Do you think that courses on values and ethical behavior should be taught in the Hutchinson public schools, or do you think that this responsibility should be left to the students' parents and the churches?

_____ Yes, schools _____ No, parents & churches _____ Both _____ No opinion

8. A number of labor and economic forecasts say that most jobs in the near future will require skills in using the computer. How well do you believe the Hutchinson public schools are doing in teaching computer using skills?

_____ Very well _____ Satisfactorily _____ Poorly _____ No opinion

9. Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in the United States, were graded in the same way. What grades would you give the public schools in the nation as a whole -- A, B, C, D or FAIL ?

_____ A _____ B _____ C _____ D _____ Fail _____ No opinion

10. How about the public schools in Hutchinson? What grade would you give our local public schools?

_____ A _____ B _____ C _____ D _____ Fail _____ No opinion

11. Do you feel that more public funds or about the same amount should be spent on students who are "at risk" of failing than on average students?

_____ Spend more _____ Spend same amount _____ Spend less _____ No opinion

12. Recently a tax increase was approved to add eleven elementary guidance counselors primarily to serve students identified as "at risk" for failure and dropping out. Do you approve of the public schools adding this new service?

_____ Strongly approve _____ Approve _____ Disapprove _____ Strongly disapprove _____ No opinion

13. Do you feel that high school students who participate in sports and extracurricular activities should be required to pass *all* subjects they are taking?

_____ Strongly agree _____ Agree _____ Disagree _____ Strongly disagree _____ No opinion

14. The two middle schools in Hutchinson offer a smaller number of after-school student activities (sports, music, debate team, etc.) than does the high school. Should their after-school activities program be increased?
_____ Yes _____ No _____ No opinion

List activities you believe should be offered _____

15. Hutchinson, as do other school districts in the state, receives money to run the public schools from the local property tax, personal property tax (automobile), and general state aid. Which source of school revenue would you favor increasing if the school district needed more money?

_____ Local property tax _____ Personal property tax _____ State aid
_____ All should be increased equally

16. For the past three years Hutchinson voters have not supported a property tax increase to raise money for school building maintenance/repair projects and new equipment purchases. Do you believe a tax increase is presently needed to help the public schools maintain its buildings in good repair and buy the needed equipment?

_____ yes _____ No _____ Maybe _____ No opinion

17. From what you know about the Hutchinson public schools, how would you rate the overall quality of the teaching staff?

_____ Excellent _____ Good _____ Average _____ Fair _____ Poor _____ No opinion

18. Teachers' salaries in Hutchinson are built around a schedule that provides yearly raises based on the number of years taught and number of college courses completed. What is your opinion about this approach to yearly salary raises for teachers?

_____ Ideal _____ satisfactory _____ inappropriate _____ No opinion
_____ should be based on teaching performance only

19. Teachers salaries in Hutchinson are currently $ 1,100.00 below the state-wide average. Would you be willing to pay more taxes to raise their salaries to the state-wide average?

_____ Yes _____ No _____ No opinion

20. How would you grade the performance of "central office" administrators in the Hutchinson public schools? The central office includes the superintendent of schools and those supporting staff located at 1520 N. Plum. A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

_____ A _____ B _____ C _____ D _____ Fail _____ No opinion

21. In 1987-88 the salaries for "central office" administrators in Hutchinson were at the state-wide average. Do you think salaries for these administrators are too high, too low or just about right?

_____ Too high _____ Too low _____ Just about right _____ No opinion

22. In 1987-88 the salaries for Hutchinson school principals were about $3000 below the state average. Would you support the Board of Education increasing principals salaries?

_____ Strongly support _____ support _____ oppose _____ strongly oppose _____ No opinion

23. To what degree are the Hutchinson public schools effective in attracting participation by parents in school affairs?

_____ Highly effective _____ Fairly effective _____ Not very effective _____ Ineffective
_____ No opinion

24. Do you agree that the Board of Education is an effective advocate of children and youth, that is, adequately safeguarding the educational welfare of all students, irrespective of age, race, ethnicity or ability to learn?

_____ Strongly agree _____ Agree _____ Disagree _____ Strongly disagree _____ No Opinion

25. Do you agree that the Board of Education involves the parents of students enough in planning educational programs, including course offerings?

_____ Too much _____ Enough _____ Not enough _____ No opinion

26. The current "at large" method of electing school board members in Hutchinson means that candidates must run city-wide for election or re-election. Would you favor changing the election procedure so that Board members could be elected from neighborhood "districts" or would you favor keeping board election procedures the same?

_____ Keep elections "at-large" _____ Change to "district" elections _____ No opinion

27. Do you agree that the Board of Education works to ensure an adequate flow of resources to maintain fairness and equity among schools and programs, for example, providing a proper balance among basic academic programs, arts, physical education, vocational education, special education or remedial education.

_____ Strongly agree _____ Agree _____ Disagree _____ Strongly disagree _____ No Opinion

28. Would you agree that the Board of Education effectively seeks and responds to many forms of participation by the community.

_____ Strongly agree _____ Agree _____ Disagree _____ Strongly disagree _____ No Opinion

29. What are the sources of information you use to judge the quality of the public schools in Hutchinson; that is, where do you get your information about the schools? (Check as many as apply).

_____ Newspaper (Hutchinson News)
_____ Students
_____ Parents
_____ Television
_____ Attendance at School Board meetings
_____ Other Adults in Community
_____ School board/ faculty members
_____ Radio stations
_____ Other

PERSONAL INFORMATION

<u>Instructions</u>: It will help the Board of Education and the school district if they have a some *background information* about you. You can provide that information by responding to the following items . Remember that *any* information you provide will be treated confidentially.

Please check ( ) the options to the following that best fits your household situation.

The person completing this questionnaire is:

_____ Male _____ Female

_____ 18 to 25 years old _____ 26 to 35 _____ 36 to 45 _____ 46 to 55 _____ 56 to 65

_____ over 65

_____ Has one or more children attending the Hutchinson Public Schools
_____ Previously had one or more children attend the Hutchinson Public Schools
_____ Have pre-school child who will attend the Hutchinson Public Schools
_____ Has one or more children attending a private or parochial school in Hutchinson
_____ Never had children attend the Hutchinson Public Schools
_____ Has one or more students attending a school outside the Hutchinson public school district

I consider myself: _____ White _____ Black _____ Hispanic _____ Asian American
_____ Native American _____ Other

Highest level of formal education attained:

_____ 8th grade or less _____ some high school _____ High School Graduate

_____ some college _____ College graduate (4yr.) _____ Graduate degree

_____ I (we) own this house _____ I (we) rent this house or apartment

I (we) have lived in this house (or apartment):
_____ less than one year _____ 1 to 5 years _____ 6 to 10 years _____ 11 to 15 years

_____ 16 to 20 years _____ over 20 years

I.(we) have lived in Hutchinson:

_____ less than one year _____ 1 to 5 years _____ 6 to 10 years _____ 11 to 15 years

_____ 16 to 20 years _____ over 20 years _____ all my life

Annual total household income is:

_____ less than $10,000 _____ $10,001 to 20,000 _____ $20,001 to 30,000

_____ $30,001 to $40,000 _____ $40,001 to 50,000 _____ over $50,000

How many wage earners live in this household?

_____ 1 _____ 2 _____3 _____ 4 or more

If you have any additional suggestions or opinions concerning the school district you want to tell the Board of Education, please write it in the blank space below.

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. PLEASE PLACE YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE IN THE PREPAID, SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE AND RETURN IMMEDIATELY.

Mail to: Hutchinson Public Schools
Box 1908
Hutchinson, Kansas 67504 1908